



*He must choose between  
legacy and love.*

TO  
BE A  
*Spy*

A SPY SERIES SHORT STORY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SON OF A DUKE

JESSIE  
CLEVER

# TO BE A SPY

**JESSIE CLEVER**

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*For Mr. Brown*

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*London*

*December 1823*

It happened on Marlborough Street a little past two o'clock two days before Christmas.

Samuel had just returned from Eton the day before as his Greek studies had compelled him to stay longer than the rest of the students. It all sounded rather dull, but honestly, it was quite thrilling as one of his tutors believed he had stumbled upon an undiscovered Biblical text. The ramifications could be enormous, and so when asked to assist him in analyzing the text, Samuel had stayed on, of course. It wasn't as if he would miss the opportunity.

And thus two days before Christmas, he found himself on Marlborough trying desperately to find a present for Jane and Elizabeth. He wondered briefly if any other man of ten and eighteen was stricken with not just one headstrong sister but two for whom to shop, and if those sisters were raised by an equally headstrong mother. All three of them would not settle for the customary ribbons or baubles or fabrics that other ladies would surely drool over. If it were anything less than divine, the Black women would not find it at all appealing.

Samuel stared in one window after another hoping inspiration would strike. It was while waiting for inspiration that the crime was committed.

He was standing innocently enough outside of Rugbottom's Books admiring a particularly ornate illustration of Shakespeare's sonnets when the commotion began behind him. Having been raised in less than ordinary circumstances, the time that lapsed between when the commotion began and when Samuel noticed it was rather exaggerated. But commotions were quite common in the Black family, and he thought nothing of it.

Until Lady Delia Witherspoon screamed.

"He's stolen my reticule!"

Samuel turned at this in time to see Lady Witherspoon pointing at a fleeing figure clutching the offended reticule under his arm.

And then Lady Witherspoon screamed again. "That man! He's stolen my reticule!"

The fleeing man charged at Samuel directly, as it was previously noted, Samuel merely stood in the middle of the pavement staring into a window. He was obviously ripe for any interaction with a passerby on the pavement, even should that passerby be a thief.

As he watched the thief approach, Samuel's mind took that opportunity to think on matters. He wondered briefly if other

gentlemen stepped out of the way of fleeing criminals or if they advanced. He wondered if they cowered at the thought of getting their waistcoat ruined. And then he wondered what the wives of said gentlemen would think if their noble husbands did not act to avenge the slight against a lady.

Samuel thought none of that likely as the gentlemen of the ton that he had had the pleasure of meeting were all sopping idiots. The apprehension of criminals was not something that suited such personalities.

And then Samuel sighed.

He sighed because he quite liked his waistcoat. It was a fine cranberry color that went well with his breeches, and if he had learned anything from his Uncle Alec, it was that a man who showed care for his dress showed care in every aspect of his life. And that was why Samuel was rather despondent to put his cranberry waistcoat in danger.

But even as he thought of his poor waistcoat, he saw his father's face rise up in his mind, and Samuel nearly laughed. His father would be looking at him rather sardonically in that moment if he knew what Samuel was truly thinking. And this was funny to Samuel as his father had always been good at creating levity in any situation.

Samuel pivoted just as the thief stepped beside him. Angling his foot just so, the thief's legs became entangled with Samuel's and down the criminal went, his face meeting the pavement with a sickening thud. Bending quickly, Samuel snatched the criminal's arm holding the reticule and twisted it behind the man's back until he heard the thief cry out in pain.

The reticule dropped into Samuel's hand, and he carefully held it off the ground before the delicate fabric could be soiled any more than it already had been. And then he knelt there, one knee in the criminal's back, his hand still holding the thief's arm pinned behind him, cradling the reticule of Lady Witherspoon.

And it was then that Samuel truly wished there were some sort of policing force in London. Some organization that would maintain order and keep peace in the ever growing city. But there was no such thing, at least not in an entity that could actually enact change.

Samuel sighed again, listening to the sounds of approaching footsteps, hoping at least one set belonged to a Bow Street runner.

But Samuel's luck was not with him that day it appeared. For when the footsteps got close enough for him to look up at the approaching party, he looked directly into the anxious eyes of his mother.

"Bullocks," Samuel said under his breath.

So was the curse of headstrong women.





Nathan did not bother to shed his coat at the door, striding through the foyer of Lofton House with marked urgency taking the stairs two at a time before bursting into the library. He saw his brother standing at the end of the room, head bent, swaying back and forth as if in some sort of curious dance.

"How bad is it?" Nathan asked quietly, taking in the situation as he could.

Alec turned, keeping his body swaying from side to side even as he kept his head down, studying the packages in his arms.

"Do you know what twins are, Nathan?" he said. Alec looked up, a mocking grin on his face. "Twins are just two babies at the same time," he said. "Two babies. At the *same* time," he hissed. "Whoever thought this was a bright idea must have had questionable mental abilities."

Nathan smiled. "Not getting much sleep these days?"

Alec only frowned at him, swaying back and forth as the twins in question slept soundly in their father's arms.

"Michael sleeps from eight o'clock until midnight while Madeline enjoys sleeping from midnight until five o'clock of the morning. It is like they've discussed things and found this arrangement most vexing to their parents and so perfect in their estimation."

Nathan made his way across the room, carefully removing his greatcoat and jacket, pushing back the sleeves of his lawn shirt. When Elizabeth had been born, only Nathan had been able to rock her to sleep, and so he stepped up to his brother, sliding one arm under Madeline and drawing her to his chest. He heard the full sigh that escaped Alec's lips, and as Nathan took the weight of the small child in his arms, he couldn't imagine the strain of holding both of them and for however long Alec had been doing it.

"How is Sarah?" Nathan asked then, adopting the same swaying motion as Alec.

Alec studied the sleeping Michael before answering. "Tired, I suppose," he said. "She's in the east salon with Maggie right now. She seems to take comfort in another woman's pending misery."

Nathan smiled, studying his own sleeping bundle. "When do Maggie and Jack expect the child to be born?"

"May, I believe," Alec said. "Maggie is having an awful time of it. Like Nora was with Jane. I think Sarah feels an ability to help the poor woman even as tired as she is."

Nathan looked up then, watching his little brother so carefully

swaying his son in his arms, and a smile spread to his lips. "Did you ever think we would end up here?" Nathan asked then, and Alec looked up at him.

"You mean strapped with obstinate wives and a brood of ungrateful children?"

"I suppose that's what I mean," Nathan said with a small laugh.

Alec's face grew suddenly serious. "I had only dreamed it, brother," he said.

Nathan knew exactly what he meant. "Speaking of our brood, Samuel came home yesterday." Nathan adjusted Madeline in his arms so that she fell more securely against his chest. He thought he caught Alec's hesitation out of the corner of his eye at his words, but he couldn't be sure.

"And?" his brother said.

"And Nora hasn't spoken to me in eighteen hours," Nathan said.

Alec frowned. "Did Samuel say anything? I mean, about joining the War Office when he's finished at Eton?"

Nathan shook his head. "I don't think he must for Nora to spiral into a fury of maternal worry. The boy has simply to appear, and Nora realizes yet again that he's nearly a grown man, a grown man that must choose his path."

"And his path is not that of gentleman farmer?" Alec asked, and Nathan could hear the laughter in his voice.

It was true that Nathan had taken on the role of gentleman farmer at the end of the war, and he had had absolutely no regrets about his decision. He had watched Nora blossom as she took charge of her own house and cared for their ever expanding family. He reveled in watching the girls grow up, felt the joy in seeing his crops flourish, his tenants prosper.

But he also knew what it was for a young man to go on a mission for the War Office. And it was not something he would deny his son.

"I'm not certain what path Samuel will choose," Nathan said then, "He has always had loftier goals. Do you recall what he said to me the first we met?"

Alec smiled at him. "He wanted to be a lamplighter to make the streets safe."

Nathan nodded, his smile cast down on the sleeping Madeline. "The little boy who wanted to be a lamplighter has grown up to be a man bent on saving the world."

"There is nothing else a son can do to terrify his mother more," Alec said.

Nathan could only agree with him.



"I can explain," Samuel said, holding up the hand with the reticule in it as some sort of surrender to his clearly enraged mother. "I was looking at the books in Rugbottom's window when I heard a ruckus behind me--"

"A ruckus, Samuel Black? A ruckus?" his mother said, her voice so even and flat the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. "I will give you a ruckus, Samuel--"

She was prevented from once again stating his full name when the damsel in distress, as it were, sailed up behind Samuel's bent body.

"Oh, my dear, dear man, how may I ever thank you?"

Samuel raised the hand holding the reticule higher so as to pass it to the poor woman.

"Think nothing of it, my lady," Samuel said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Oh," Lady Witherspoon cooed. "Such a gentleman."

"He is, indeed," his mother murmured from the other side of their interesting tableau.

It was at that moment that a Bow Street runner finally arrived, relinquishing Samuel of his duties as captor and relieving his mother of some of her stress. Further explanation was made of what had occurred and the series of events before the runner hauled off the petty thief to Bow Street.

Samuel finally turned back to his mother, his most beatific smile on his face, hoping the entire situation would pass like a rain shower in August, thundering and loud only to be followed by an eerie sort of peace. Instead, he found his mother to be just as irate as she had been when first she had found him bent over a criminal on Marlborough Street.

"Please, I must repay you in some way," Lady Witherspoon said from beside Samuel.

Allowing his mother to fume for a few moments more, Samuel turned to the woman in question and for the first time took note of her companion.

And in taking note forgot everything else that was happening in its entirety.

Standing not four feet behind Lady Witherspoon was the most beautiful woman Samuel had ever seen. She was young, perhaps only a year or two older than him. Her face was all delicate lines and soft angles, with a spray of freckles over her nose. Her almond shaped eyes

slanted downward in the middle, giving her the most compelling stare he had ever seen on a woman and driving in him a most inappropriate response. Her hair was a blazing red, tucked neatly under her bonnet but with enough exposed to taunt him into wondering what the rest of it looked like.

But her eyes.

His gaze returned to her eyes again and again, their color a mesmerizing hue somewhere between green and blue. And he fell into them, fell into the enticing pool of her eyes until he was sure he had touched her soul.

And then taking a breath, he wondered what the hell was the matter with him.

"This is my companion," Lady Witherspoon said then, "Miss Penelope Paiget."

Miss Paiget curtsied as Samuel bowed.

"And this is my mother," Samuel remembered just in time that his enraged mother stood behind him, "Mrs. Eleanora Black."

Lady Witherspoon bent to dip into a curtsy when she froze. "Oh dear me," she said, a hand going to her mouth. "I thought you looked familiar, young man. Oh, I do beg your pardon." Lady Witherspoon turned to Miss Paiget. "Penelope, dear, do you know who this is?"

Miss Paiget only smiled, a smile so soft and inviting Samuel's stomach clenched at the sight of it.

"Penelope, dear, this is the Duke of Lofton's grandson." Lady Witherspoon turned to Samuel. "I have that right, don't I, young man?"

Samuel smiled. "You do, indeed, my lady," he said, bowing. "Samuel Black at your service."

Lady Witherspoon let out something that may have been a laugh but sounded like a bird choking on a worm, and his mother remained deathly silent beside him. "Oh, you just must come to our Christmas Eve breakfast on the morrow," Lady Witherspoon said then, and Samuel thought his mother might just spontaneously combust beside him instead. "It is the least I can do to thank you for your quick and brave action."

"I'll give you brave and-" his mother began muttering behind him.

"Splendid!" Samuel said much too loudly to cover the sound of his mother's mutterings, his smile growing ever wider. "That would be lovely," he said, bowing to Lady Witherspoon. "I look forward to seeing you both on the morrow."

He looked at each of them with a small nod so as to end the conversation and the utterly dangerous situation in which his mother trembled on the wire between public decency and throttling her son.

But even as urgency compelled him to move on, he couldn't prevent his gaze from lingering just ever so much longer on Miss Penelope Paiget.



"Window shopping, truly," Nora spat, settling into her seat in the Lofton carriage moments later. "Only my son would apprehend a criminal whilst window shopping."

It was only out of sheer curiosity that Nora had ventured out that morning to Marlborough Street to see if Rugbottom's carried any Greek texts that might interest Samuel as a Christmas gift. She had not expected to catch her son in the act of apprehending a criminal instead.

"Mother, I swear that I had no intention of doing any such thing. I was merely shopping for Jane and Elizabeth," Samuel said from the opposite bench.

"And when catastrophe struck, you were all too quick to jump in," Nora said, feeling her heart pounding in her chest remembering the sight of her son bent over the criminal on the ground.

"Father would have expected it of me," Samuel said quietly then, and Nora's breath seized in her chest.

Samuel was right.

Nathan would have expected their son to act in the given situation. He would have expected Samuel to use his already too deep knowledge of spy maneuvers and tactics to stop the thief from fleeing. Nathan would have thought nothing of Samuel responding the way he had done.

Nora wanted to be sick.

"I know my training has not been formal or followed any sort of guidelines, but Father and Uncle Alec and even Lord Pemberly have been excellent instructors on the subject, and I just knew what must be done in that situation."

Nora stared at her son, wondering where her little boy went and whence this young man had come.

"It is only two days until Christmas, Mother. Surely your sense of nostalgia for the season and good will toward men will prove my case on this point."

Nora swallowed.

Samuel was right.

God, when had she become such a worrisome mother?

Was it when Jane was born and the family had begun immediately regaling her with spy stories? Was it when Elizabeth had

taken to fencing at the tender age of three, mesmerized by the way her uncle and grandfather sparred?

When was it that the infallible Miss Eleanora Quinton had become so concerned for the well-being of her children?

So concerned, in fact, as to become a bit of a nutter.

"Please, Mother, I swear I meant no harm," Samuel said then, and for a moment, she could see Nathan in his face.

While Nathan may not have been his biological father, Samuel had acquired the man's expressions, mannerisms, and even patterns of speech over the past eight years, and now, it was nearly impossible to tell the two of them apart. Nora felt an enormous sigh escape through her lips.

"I must speak with your father," she said, because right then, she would not, could not admit that her son was right.



"You are in a lot of trouble, mister."

Samuel sat with his elbows on his knees, face in his hands, as he listened to the rumblings of his parents arguing over him through the connecting doors of the sitting room in Lofton House. Whilst the murmurs of disagreement plagued him, his own indecisive thoughts on the matter plagued him more. But he managed to pick up his head at the sound of his littlest sister's voice.

Elizabeth was all of five years old and had developed a level of speech appropriate for a master scholar. His mother said she spent entirely too much time with Lady Pemberly, but it really couldn't be helped. How was his mother expected to keep a five year old out of a house continuously filled with puppies?

"You're right, my princess," Samuel said, scooping up Elizabeth to settle her on his lap. "I am in a whole heap of trouble."

"Mother says you did something unspeakable," Elizabeth said.

And Samuel hid his grin, wrestling to keep his expression appropriate for Elizabeth's seriousness.

"I did do that, in fact," Samuel said. "Pray tell, have you relayed this information to Jane?"

Elizabeth smiled "Of course!" she said, throwing up her tiny arms in triumph.

Samuel frowned.

And as if knowing the course of events thus occurring in the sitting room, the sister in question strode through the doors, her head up, shoulders back, and eyes dancing with delight.

"You're in so much trouble," she said, her mouth spreading into a

devilish grin.

Samuel nodded. "That I am," he said to Jane before looking down at Elizabeth. "But I am afraid I must add to the amount of trouble I am in because tattle tells must be punished." At this he commenced tickling the life from his littlest sister until she begged for him to stop through the cascade of her laughter.

"We leave for only a few months, and all chaos ensues in the family home?"

Samuel stopped his torture at the sound of his grandfather's voice.

"And there's my boy!" Richard cried, throwing up his arms. "I hear congratulations are in order. Apprehending a thief. Well done!"

Samuel looked quickly to the sitting room door on the other side of which his mother was surely giving his father a tongue lashing over Samuel's brave actions, as Lady Witherspoon had called them. When he looked back at the Duke of Lofton, the older man had brought his arms down, a look of concern crossing his face.

"Are they still on about you not going into War Office training when you leave Eton?" his grandfather asked, and Samuel could only nod, trying desperately to dismiss the twinge of guilt he felt pulsate deep within him.

"Grandpapa!" Elizabeth cried, nearly falling off Samuel's lap as she sailed across the room and into the extended arms of her grandfather.

"What is this about Samuel not joining the War Office?"

This from his grandmother, Lady Jane, as she entered the room, her traveling cloak still in place over her gown.

"Grandmother!" Jane cried in a near perfect imitation of her sister's cry moments before, "You will not believe what I discovered whilst you were gone!" Jane ended the sentence with her face stuffed against her grandmother's stomach, the two caught in a tight embrace.

"What is it you've discovered, my child?" Jane said, looking down at her granddaughter.

"I have a knack for languages," young Jane said without hesitation. "My tutors are all in agreement."

Lady Jane nodded, her face masked in grave understanding. "That is quite a pronouncement," she said.

Young Jane smiled. "Do you think, perhaps, I will be given an assignment in a foreign land from the War Office?" the girl asked.

Jane looked up at Samuel, and he only frowned. "I think that is a question best asked on another day," Jane said, and cast a knowing smile in Samuel's direction.

"Did you bring us treasures?" Elizabeth said from her perch in Richard's arms.

"Yes, how was Paris?" Samuel asked, leaning back in the sofa and

crossing one foot to rest on the opposite knee.

"Florence, my son," Richard said. "Your grandmother insisted I take her to Florence this time."

Jane held up a hand as if to emphasize her next statement. "It had to be done, I'm afraid," she said, "Florence was just vivid in the wealth of its history and architecture and--"

"Food," Richard added, "There was a lot of good food."

And together, Richard and Jane laughed as if sharing some sort of secret.

Samuel smiled at his grandparents, and somewhere inside of him he remembered almond shaped eyes and endless pools of blue and green.

"The world travelers have returned!"

Samuel looked to the hall doorway to see his Aunt Sarah, his cousin, Michael in her arms.

Richard promptly set Elizabeth on her feet, extending his arms toward Sarah. "And how is Master Richard Michael today?" Richard said, as Sarah handed over the bundle.

"Not sleeping is how he is," Sarah muttered.

Jane frowned. "You both must be so tired," she said, stripping off her cloak and gloves. "Where are Emily and Ashley?" Lady Jane asked, speaking of Alec and Sarah's older children.

"Emily, bless her little heart, is singing Madeline to sleep with the help of her father. Ashley went home with Lady Pemberly this morning to see the new litter of pups. I suppose at some point she'll want to give him back. Lud," Sarah finished as she slumped into a chair.

Jane looked about her as the room had suddenly become overrun with children, and Samuel watched as a smile spread slowly and beautifully across her face.

"Where did all of these children come from?" she said, shaking her head.

And Samuel knew that no matter what his parents decided or where his own mind settled, everything was going to be all right.



"Mrs. Black, do you know what I have concluded in the past few days we've been in London?"

Samuel's mother looked at her husband as the Lofton carriage bounced its way toward the Witherspoon residence and the much dreaded Christmas Eve breakfast.

"What is that, Mr. Black?" his mother asked.



“It is that I much preferred being an anonymous bastard son,” Nathan said, running a finger along the inside of his collar, disturbing the knot of his cravat.

Nora frowned and reached up to repair the damage done. “I cannot say the same about being a housekeeper, but I can agree with the anonymous part,” she said.

“Not more than five years ago, we never would have received such an invitation, and now look at us.” Nathan gestured half-heartedly with his hands as his wife continued to work at his disrupted cravat. And then he smirked at Samuel, and Samuel smirked back.

“It’s amazing how quickly the ton forgets such things,” Nora said, settling back in her seat.

The morning was crisp, and the threat of snow hung in the air. Samuel took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on the passing London scenery.

And wondered if she would be there.

A companion would likely be invited to a social event at the house of one’s employer. It had been some time since Samuel had frequented the circles of paid help, but having been born into the circle, he knew quite readily where the companion’s place fell in the hierarchy. And so he let smolder the flame of anticipation that had begun burning the moment he stepped into the carriage that morning into a healthy blaze as the conveyance finally stopped in front of their destination.

Having found that he was indeed in a whole heap of trouble as his sisters had surmised, Samuel handed his mother down from the carriage so as to acquire some amount of good graces from her. But once they were admitted to the Witherspoon residence, and Lady Witherspoon swooped upon the infamous son and daughter-in-law of the Duke of Lofton, Samuel knew he was in trouble for an entirely different set of reasons if the look his mother cast in his direction as she was led off into the crowd was any indication.

Samuel took the opportunity to slip into the crowd as quickly as was possible, seeking out some of his mates from school, who being at the age of not quite entering society but really too old to stay at home, were often victims of invitations to such events as teas, musicales and breakfasts. And although it was enjoyable to see his friends, his mind would not hold on any one subject for long, but instead, his eyes traveled the room, searching, searching, and searching some more.

She must be there. She *must*. Perhaps he was just not looking hard enough.

But it was during an intense debate on the use of the Latin in certain instances of scholarly study, that Samuel caught a flash of

movement in the corridor. It was the briefest of glances, but he knew that line of nose, that curve of mouth, and enticingly, that flash of red. But the glimpse was gone in a moment as the woman he sought left.

She simply left.

Through the buzz of conversation filling the drawing room in which the breakfast guests had been ushered to wait for the commencement of the meal, Samuel heard the distinctive clip clop of feet going down stairs and the unmistakable opening of a door.

So he did what any member of the Black family would do.

He followed her.



Snow had begun falling as Penelope Paiget stepped off the last tread of the Witherspoon house stoop, setting her feet to pavement and striding off into the unknown.

It all sounded rather dramatic when the truth of it was Penelope had nowhere to go.

The only reason she had left the house at all was for the very fact that Lady Witherspoon had given her the morning off, and she had escaped as quickly as possible. It was not that her employ was in anyway unpleasant. Lady Witherspoon was remarkable in her ability to need nothing from Penelope except the woman's presence, and in that, Penelope was grateful.

But when the opportunity to get out of the house arose, Penelope took it.

She began walking, her boot heels striking the pavement with a satisfying clip. It was only when she had turned the corner that she became aware of another pair of footfalls behind her.

With the events of the previous day still fresh in her mind, Penelope adjusted the grip on her reticule, her fingers digging into the fabric as she let the strap slide from her wrist and fall into the palm of her hand. She waited, listening to the sound of the footfalls pick up pace and with it, the beat of her heart, thundering in her chest.

And so when the hand closed on her shoulder, she did the only sensible thing a woman could.

She swung about, her arm coming up, the strap of the reticule sliding neatly into her grip as she let the purse fly, connecting with an extraordinary wallop against the side of her assailant's head. The man sprang backward but not quickly enough to avoid the impending collision, and he staggered at the impact, his hand going up to cup the side of his head.

"Thunder and turf, woman," Samuel Black said, clutching the

point of contact. "What in God's name do you have in that reticule?"

Penelope's mouth was quite ostensibly agape. She knew her governess was somewhere scolding her, but it couldn't be helped. "I am terribly sorry," she said, her hands immediately going out to do what she could not say, but she needed to help this poor man she had just assaulted. "I didn't know it was you, and I—"

Mr. Black held up a hand. "It's quite all right," he said, straightening enough to speak directly to her and not at the pavement, his hand still pressed to the side of his head.

"Rocks," she said, feeling her face slide into a mask of apology.

Mr. Black raised an eyebrow at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Rocks," she said, holding up her reticule. "You asked what was in it, and the answer is rocks."

Now it was Mr. Black's turn to have a mouth agape. "Good God, woman," he muttered, and she almost smiled at his impoliteness. "You carry rocks in your reticule?"

Her governess was most definitely somewhere scolding the pair of them now. "It's for protection," she answered.

"Shall we start again?" Mr. Black said then, letting his hand drop to his side, a smile coming to his face.

And that was the moment when Penelope Paiget knew she was in trouble.

Samuel Black was an excessively handsome gentleman with proven qualities of valor, bravery, honesty, and compassion. If he turned out to be intelligent, witty, nice to animals, and good to his mother, she was doomed.

"Mr. Samuel Black," he said, bowing to her.

"Miss Penelope Paiget," she said, curtsying in response.

"It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance," Mr. Black said. "Would you mind a companion for your stroll?"

Penelope was careful to keep her smile polite but not *too* polite. "Indeed, I would," she said.

And then Mr. Black offered his arm, and Penelope's stomach dropped to her toes.

Her father's untimely death had prevented Penelope from having any sort of season she may have hoped for or even dreamed of, and never before had a man offered his arm to her. So she hesitated a moment longer than was likely proper before she slipped her hand into the crook of Mr. Black's arm.

"Shouldn't we have a chaperone or something?" Penelope said then because it was what popped into her head when she felt the firmness of Mr. Black's arm beneath her gloved fingers.

"I think so, but I'm not one to always follow society's rules," Mr. Black said. "I assure you, you are in no danger from me." He cast a

smile at her. "My mother would have my hide if I did anything untoward to a lady."

She couldn't help but return his smile. "Very well," she said, "But perhaps I should ask you how you came to be on the same street as I. Are you adept at following people, Mr. Black? That is, in addition to your criminal apprehending skills."

Mr. Black smiled at her.

"I am quite adept, Miss Paiget."

She wanted to ask more at his cryptic words, but something stopped her, deciding instead to simply enjoy the feel of his arm against her side.

"Where is it that you are headed today?" he asked, and Penelope shook her head.

"Nowhere in particular, I'm afraid," she answered. "I just enjoy walking."

Mr. Black stopped her. "Then would you care to do something daring?" he asked, and his words sent a thrill through her she had never felt before in her life.

The very sane and proper part of her said to adamantly refuse the man while another part of her sang with joy at having the option of doing something daring.

So that was why she said, "Yes, I would love to," before her proper self could object.

Mr. Black smiled and began walking again, his pace more purposeful and direct than it had been, and she focused to keep up with him.

They walked in silence for several blocks before crossing over into Bloomsbury and stopping in front of a small establishment from which enticing aromas drifted into the street.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"A coffee house," Mr. Black said, his smile reminding her of a child who had just been given a sweet.

"Coffee?" Penelope looked at the small edifice, the windows fogged over with steam from the inside. She caught glimpses of patrons gathered round tables, cups raised, and the general sense of heated conversation.

"Yes, have you ever tried it?" Mr. Black asked, and Penelope shook her head.

"Coffee," she repeated, and Mr. Black pulled her inside, leaving the falling snow and cold of the London streets behind them.

She was instantly swallowed by the warmth and vivacity of the coffee house, the rich scents of the drink mixing with the vigor of the patrons consuming it. The enthusiasm in the room was so thick, she swore she could scoop it up with a teaspoon.

Mr. Black led her to a small table in the back of the room, casting a call of greeting to a serving girl who promptly came to their table with a tray laden with things Penelope assumed one used to consume the black elixir.

"No Lord Pemberly today?" the serving girl asked, and Mr. Black smiled.

"Not today, I'm afraid," he said.

"Lord Pemberly?" Penelope asked when the serving girl had gone.

Mr. Black nodded. "He's a—" he hesitated as Penelope watched him search for the right words. "A friend of the family," he finally said, "A very close friend of the family."

Penelope wondered if she should think his words odd, but there was nothing to indicate that they were. "I see," she said.

"So tell me about yourself, Miss Paiget," Mr. Black said, pouring a cup of the hot liquid and extending it in her direction.

"Penelope, please," she said, "Only my governess and Lady Witherspoon have ever called me Miss Paiget, and it makes me sound terribly too much like a spinster."

Mr. Black laughed. "You are anything but a spinster," he said, "But you must call me Samuel as well."

"All right, Samuel," she said, and then she asked the question that had been on her mind since the incident on Marlborough Street yesterday afternoon. "How is it that a gentleman's son knows how to apprehend criminals with such alacrity?"



Samuel set down the coffee press, watching Penelope Paiget's face as her question lingered in the air between them. Something he had learned very quickly was how to lie when someone asked him about his family's activities. The Blacks were not always ones to follow society's expectations, and it often meant questions for Samuel at school.

But when Penelope Paiget asked him the same question, he answered in the only way he knew how when it came to this particular woman.

"My father is a spy for the War Office. He taught me."

He added sugar to his coffee and offered the dish to Penelope, who sat with her mouth hanging open much as it had when she realized she had hit him in the head with a bag full of rocks. "Sugar?" he asked when she did not move and continued to stare at him.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, taking the sugar dish from him.

He felt a jolt of electricity as her fingers brushed his and

wondered what else he could hand her to experience the feeling again. "Spy," he said the word again, "My father is a spy for the War Office. He taught me how to handle myself in situations of duress."

He added a small amount of milk to his cup and offered the pitcher to Penelope. And when she refused the milk, he felt a pang of regret at not being able to accidentally on purpose slide his fingers over hers.

"Situations of duress?" Penelope asked. "Is that a normal topic between a father and son?"

Samuel shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea," he said. "My family has never been really ordinary in that regard."

Penelope frowned at him. "I can imagine."

He smiled at her. "What about you? How long have you been Lady Witherspoon's companion?"

"A little more than two years," she said, taking a sip of her coffee.

He didn't know what was more pleasing, the fact that she appeared to enjoy the drink or the look of sheer ecstasy that came over her face when she swallowed. He felt something tug in the region of his groin and wondered if he should scold himself for such a base reaction. But in that moment she was entirely too beautiful, and he couldn't summon the strength to scold himself for anything.

"This is quite good," she said, and he smiled at the incredulity in her voice.

"It is," he said. "I'm glad you enjoy it." He took another sip from his own cup. "Have you always thought to be a companion?" he asked.

Penelope set down her cup, frowning at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"When considering an occupation. Have you always thought to be a companion?"

Penelope continued to frown at him. "I didn't know the sons of gentlemen thought about such things."

Samuel shook his head, feeling slightly shameful for not explaining earlier. "I'm sorry," he said, "I should have elaborated on the unusual attributes of my family."

Penelope cocked her head at him, looking more adorable than one of Lady Pemberly's puppies.

"My mother was a housekeeper before she met my father, and she and I lived below stairs. So I am quite familiar with one grappling with the decision of future employment."

If Penelope's mouth had been agape before, her jaw nearly fell off at this.

"Your mother was a housekeeper?"

Samuel nodded. "It was an-" he laughed, "*Unusual* situation."

Penelope snapped her mouth closed. "I'm beginning to realize that."

He gestured for her to continue. "So what is it that made you choose to be a companion?"

Penelope took a sip from her cup, shrugging her shoulders with an air of casualness. "I'm afraid that where your family may be quite unusual, my circumstances were all too terribly usual for a girl in my situation."

"And what situation was that?"

"My father died with more debt than the riskiest of gamblers, leaving me in a quite uncomfortable bind."

Samuel stared at her, his chest tightening. "I'm sorry," he said.

But she waved off his apology. "It's quite all right. I had just turned eight and ten, and instead of a London season, I received an offer of employment. Lady Witherspoon swooped in as she is prone to do and offered me a position as a paid companion. All is well."

There was something in her almond shaped eyes that suggested she wasn't entirely telling the truth, or perhaps she didn't know she failed to tell the entire truth. But there was something about her expression that made him sad.

"So are you going to be a spy like your father?" she asked, and Samuel shrugged.

"That subject is open for debate at the moment."

Penelope tilted her head again in question. "It is?"

Samuel nodded. "My mother is having difficulty thinking of me as a spy," he said.

"I can imagine so," she said. "You're her oldest child, then?"

Samuel looked at her. "Yes, how did you know?"

Penelope shrugged. "It stands to reason that she would feel such anxiety at the thought of her baby taking on such a dangerous task."

Samuel straightened, frowning. "I am not a baby," he said.

And Penelope laughed, the sound like the beating of a fairy's wings, and he wondered if he were spending too much time in the company of his sisters.

"I didn't say you were a baby," Penelope said, "I said to your mother, you are *her* baby, and you always will be. It's hard for parents, I think, to watch their children grow apart from them. And that is essentially what is happening. You raise a child to leave you. It's rather sad."

Something shifted inside of Samuel then, and for the first time in a very long while or perhaps ever, he felt he understood his mother as a person and not as his mother.

"Thank you," he heard himself say, and Penelope blinked at him.

"For what?"

“For saying what you just said. I think it was important.”

She laughed again, that mystical, magical sound, and he felt the shift settle in his chest. “So really a spy then?” she asked.

“Do you think it an unwise decision?” he asked.

She tilted her head in the way he was becoming to realize was quite common for her. “I don’t think it unwise, no. It’s not that really. It’s just—

Samuel hung on that last word as if it were the rope keeping him from plunging over a cliff.

“Just what?” he finally asked when she didn’t continue.

“Well, yesterday, seeing you apprehend that thief. It was all very...good,” she finally finished.

“Good?”

“Yes, what you did was honorable and out of the ordinary for most gentlemen, and I just thought it would be nice if there were more men like you in London. Men who did honorable things to protect the citizens of the city.”

Samuel shifted in his seat. “Like a policing force?” he asked.

Penelope’s brow folded into a wrinkle of confusion. “Policing force?” she asked.

Samuel nodded. “Like the Bow Street Runners only with more authority. Someone to, as you said, protect the citizens of the city.”

Penelope smiled as the confusion disappeared from her brow. “Yes, something quite like that,” she said. “I mean, I understand the good in being a spy, and how it would be honorable to protect the crown, but there is so much good to be done right here in London. It’s just finding someone to do it that seems to be the problem.”

Samuel stared at this woman who had so articulately spoken the very thing that had bothered him for so long about his home. The lack of a policing force to protect the residents of the city. And this incredible, young woman had just put into words the problem of it.

There was no one to do it.

And while he wrestled with this amazing development, his mother stepped into his line of vision behind Penelope, and all thought fled.

If Jane and Elizabeth had thought him in a lot of trouble before this, he was now surely to be hanged and quartered.

But before he could so much as react to the presence of his mother, he saw his father, rushing through the door of the coffee house in time to physically remove his mother from the building. Samuel blinked, watching his father pick up the squirming, outraged form of his mother and carry her from the establishment.

Samuel couldn’t help a smile coming to his lips and dropped his head, shaking it in frustration.



“What is it?” Penelope asked, the sound of laughter and inquisitiveness in her voice.

“My mother is here,” he said. “It looks like I’ve been caught.”

Penelope spun about in her seat, but he waved off her reaction.

“My father has likely given me a few moments to deliver some parting pleasantries.”

“Oh?” Penelope asked.

“He carried her out of the building.”

Penelope laughed then, and he felt the entire situation spiral out of his control. He was only in his eighteenth year. He was due to finish his studies at Eton that spring, and it would be on to the next step in his education. He was thinking Oxford or Cambridge if training at the War Office was out of the question. But something about his conversation with Penelope had him doubting his own expectations even more than he had been over the last several months.

Suddenly, he leaned forward, picking up Penelope’s hands and cradling them in his own. He ran his thumbs over the tender skin of her palms and reveled in the way her breath caught at his touch.

“Penelope Paiget, I know what I’m about to say may not make sense, and I have no right to ask it of you, but I must.”

She leaned in, her face falling into a veil of seriousness. “You’re not going to ask me to commit some act of espionage, are you?”

He laughed softly. “No, I’m afraid it’s worse than that,” he said, staring into the green-blue depths of her eyes. “I need you to wait for me.”

He felt the hitch in her breath radiate clear through her palms and into his hands.

“What?” she said, her tongue darting out to lick her lips and sending his mind reeling out of control.

“I need you to wait for me. I cannot ask you for your hand in marriage right now, but trust me, if I could, I would have already done it. But it would not be right of me. Nor is it right of me to ask that you wait, but if I didn’t ask it of you, I would always regret it.”

He tightened his grip on her hands, felt the responding pressure in hers.

“One day I will come back to you, Penelope Paiget, and I will ask you for your hand.”

Penelope opened her mouth, but he stopped her with a kiss, so light and soft it may not have even happened.

“No, don’t say anything. I don’t want you to feel obligation to an unfair promise. But please, Penelope, wait for me.”

And with that he stood, casting a handful of coins on the table and walking out of the coffee house, leaving behind the woman with whom he knew he was meant to spend the rest of his life.



Richard waited in one of the chairs in front of the drawing room fire where Nora could easily find him. He had heard of his grandson's adventures that morning, and he knew it was only a matter of time before Nora needed to talk to someone. And she didn't disappoint when she appeared moments later, quietly entering the room as was her way and settling in the chair opposite him.

He and Jane had been gone for several months, traveling throughout the continent and Mediterranean, but in that time, not much had changed. In this he took solace as the passing of time was all too evident every chance he looked in a mirror.

He did not speak and neither did Nora for a very long time. He let the silence linger in the room, knowing that when she was ready, Nora would ask her questions.

"A woman," she said, "I thought I only had to worry about him becoming a spy, and now I catch him at a coffee house with a woman."

Richard only smiled at this, knowing that Nora had spoken more for her own benefit than for his.

But then she turned to him. "How did you do it?" she asked, "How did you let Nathan and Alec join the War Office?"

And there it was.

The question he knew she had come to ask, needed to ask, and asked of the only person she thought could give her an answer she could trust.

"I let them go," Richard said, moving his eyes from the fire to capture her gaze.

Nora only looked at him, and he sat up, leaning his elbows on his knees so that he leaned closer to her.

"By the time the boys were old enough to join the Office, I had already nearly lost Jane a dozen times or more. In my mind, I knew that if I had Nathan and Alec's help, we could keep Jane safe." He chuckled then and saw the flash of a tired smile on Nora's face. "Well, safer than she was at the time," he corrected. "I'm not sure it's possible to keep Jane entirely safe."

"But the situation with Samuel is so different," Nora said.

And Richard shook his head. "No, it isn't," he said. "It's not different at all."

Nora frowned at him, her brow collapsing into a wrinkle of concern. "I would differ with you on that point."

Richard smiled at his headstrong daughter-in-law. "And I would

prove you wrong, my dear,” he said. “You see, Samuel is not doing this to make you worry or to cause you concern because he has a lust for adventure. He’s doing this to protect *you*.”

He knew his words had struck when he caught the slight hitch in Nora’s chest.

“Samuel has spent the last eight years learning what is really happening in this world, and he has had eight years of watching his mother move about as if nothing is amiss. Samuel has always been the protector in this family, and he always will be.” He paused, letting his words sink in. “You are not releasing him into some horrible circumstance, Nora. You’re letting him go do the thing he must because he loves you.”

Nora only stared at him.

“Your only fault, Nora, is in raising a son who cares about his mother.”

And with that silence fell again.

When the knock sounded at the door, Nora turned her head. “Jane’s caught something on fire surely,” she muttered, and Richard smiled, before calling out, “Enter.”

He was not surprised to see Samuel coming through the door, as he was certain the lad could not beat down his confidence enough to avoid his mother entirely. Only now Samuel stood just inside the doorway, looking rather young for all of his eighteen years.

“Grandfather, I’d like a moment with Mother,” Samuel said, and Richard saw the young boy who had appeared on his doorstep that long ago night, wrapped in a blanket, nestled in his son’s arms.

Richard stood. “Very well,” he said and looked between Nora and Samuel.

He strode to the door but stopped next to his grandson, shocked as he always was to find he could look him directly in the eye without having to tilt his head down.

“Good luck,” Richard murmured with a knowing smile that Samuel almost returned.

And then he stepped out of the room, closing the door on mother and son.



Nora stared at the strange man who stood on the threshold of the drawing room. Once upon a time, she had cradled a baby boy who had his same eyes, his same smile, and once upon a time, that same little boy had told her he loved her.

And now she would have to let him go.

She gestured to the seat beside her, fearing her throat may close if she tried to speak.

“Mother,” Samuel said before he had fully sat, “I need to apologize for something.”

His words startled her, and she raised her eyebrows at him. “Oh?”

Samuel nodded. “I never looked at this decision from your point of view, and that was rather immature of me. I never imagined what it must feel like for you to watch the baby you held in your arms become an adult,” he said and then laughed uncomfortably, his eyes seeking the floor.

Nora sat very still, feeling her own thoughts put into words and spoken back to her.

“I guess what I need to say is I’m sorry for being obtuse and not considering how you felt about everything.”

Nora reached across the space between them and took Samuel’s hands in hers. It wasn’t until the first tear struck their joined hands that she realized she was crying.

“Mama,” Samuel whispered the name he had not called her since leaving for Eton, “Are you crying?”

Nora felt the tears burning the back of her throat, and all she could do was nod.

Samuel shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve never seen you cry,” he whispered more urgently.

And amidst her tears, Nora burst into laughter at her son’s awkward posture and concerned expression. “I’m sorry,” she finally said, but the laugh overtook her, and she couldn’t say anything else.

Samuel let go of her hands to reach for his handkerchief, extending the small square of fabric in her direction. She accepted it and dabbed at her eyes and cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Samuel,” she said again, more in control this time. “I have never seen a look quite like that on your face before.” She tucked the soiled handkerchief into the hem of her sleeve and took up her son’s hands once more. “Now it’s my turn,” she said. “I should have realized long ago that you would want to do exactly as your father and grandfather and uncle. I suppose all those years ago when we would send you below stairs to gather information for one mission or another, I never really realized that you were spying even then.” She paused and pushed a lock of Samuel’s hair from his forehead as if he were still that young boy, scampering about on missions for the War Office. “So I guess you will be joining the War Office when you leave Eton, then?” Nora asked the question the answer to which she had avoided for months.

And she braced herself, rolling her shoulders back and clenching her hands in her son’s grip. It was all right. No matter what happened,

she had Nathan and the girls, and Richard and Jane, and Sarah and the whole lot of them all. She was no longer alone in the world with a young son to protect. Now, she had a young son who was ready to protect her. Richard was right, as she had known he would be.

Only instead of hearing the answer that she had feared for so long, Samuel looked hesitantly at the fire before returning his gaze to her face. "Actually, Mama, there's something else that's come up. Something that's been worrying me for some time," he said.

At his words, Nora's heart skipped with a brief flutter of hope. "What is it?" she asked, surprised as her voice came out as a mere whisper.

Samuel hesitated again before drawing in a big breath and saying, "I'm not sure the War Office is exactly what I'm looking for."

Nora's heart thrilled at his words, her blood pounding in her veins, buzzing in her ears as the words and their meaning settled in.

That was until-

"I want to do something that is potentially more dangerous but may eventually protect many citizens here in London."

Nora's heart stilled somewhat.

"But I'm going to need your help, Mama," he said, "I'm going to need your help in speaking with Father and Grandfather about it, because I think I'm going to need help from someone in the government." Samuel paused long enough to lick his lips and then continued. "I think what I want to do is going to take a lot of time and thought and very hard work, but in the end, it will be worth it. Will you help me, Mama?"

He looked at her, and in his face, she saw her baby boy, cradled in her arms for the first time, attempting his first steps, racing into a cluttered ballroom at the possibility of seeing a dead body, finding delight in finally having a sister.

There were so many stories to her life with Samuel, so many chapters opened and closed. And as she sat there on Christmas Eve, in a house filled with those she loved, she held her son's hands in her own and knew a new story had just begun.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessie decided to be a writer because the job of Indiana Jones was already filled.

Taking her history degree dangerously, Jessie tells the stories of courageous heroines, the men who dared to love them, and the world that tried to defeat them.

Jessie makes her home in the great state of New Hampshire where she lives with her husband and two very opinionated Basset hounds. For more, visit her website at [jessieclever.com](http://jessieclever.com).

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